

The neoliberal university and its alternatives

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The second of a new series of articles, *Soundings Futures*, which sets out to develop programmatic alternatives to the system of neoliberalism

The concept of a 'neoliberal' university itself implies that there are, or have been, universities of other kinds. But what other kinds? This article will ask if we can situate the 'neoliberal' university in a theoretical and historical context which makes sense of what is happening to universities, and may help us to imagine them in a different way.*

Education and society

In his chapter 'Education and British Society' in *The Long Revolution*, Raymond Williams describes the development of schooling in Britain as the outcome of struggles and compromises between three different traditions.¹ The first of these was that of the 'democratic educator', the second that of the 'industrial trainer', while the third was that of 'old humanism' - the commitment to preserve and sustain

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a traditional hierarchical culture. The ideal of the first of these was linked to the idea of an educated, participating democracy, and it held that education should be as widely and continuously available as was possible. Arguing against class-based assumptions, Williams wrote that we need to:

... get rid of conscious or unconscious class thinking and begin thinking of educational organisation in terms of keeping the learning process going for as long as possible in every life. Instead of the sorting and grading process, natural to a class society, we should regard human learning in a genuinely open way, as the most valuable real resource we have, and therefore as something which we should have to produce a special argument to limit rather than a special argument to extend.

The 'industrial trainer' conception saw the purpose of education as essentially to provide the workforce needed by the capitalist economy, both in terms of skills and appropriate kinds of 'social character', accepting the inequalities and hierarchies natural to class society. The 'old humanist' conception aimed to preserve the values of 'culture' against both industrial materialism, and the corruptions and dilutions of commercial mass culture. The 'democratic educator' conception was championed by the labour movement in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and in part informed post-war policy on the expansion of both universities and education. Thus, although no-one could argue that the 'democratic educator' conception has much traction in twenty-first century universities, this was not always so. Before looking at the major changes instituted by successive neoliberal governments, it is helpful to consider the changing role of universities in different historical periods.

University and society: an historical view

One way of understanding the role universities play within our social system is to look at their different phases of development as modes of production and relations between classes have changed. This is a complicated story. Universities were originally a 'steering mechanism' of an earlier social formation, socialising its elites, and functioning as one of the bearers of its knowledge and high culture. Late medieval and early modern universities like Oxford and Cambridge educated

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members of ruling classes for high positions in the church, the law and government. Until the nineteenth century, their principal function was more to provide a cultural and social formation for elites than to produce useful knowledge. (The Royal Society, and provincial societies and networks, and not the universities, were the early incubators of the scientific and technological revolution in England - Scotland had a different tradition.) We can thus see the original role of English universities as one of cultural reproduction and transmission for a predominantly aristocratic social fraction, which did however offer some opportunities for social mobility for talented individuals from lower classes, and gave capabilities to the state and the church.

These functions became substantially enlarged during the nineteenth century. The rising bourgeoisie of industrial manufacturers became instrumental in the formation of the great provincial universities of Leeds, Birmingham, Manchester, Nottingham, Sheffield, Southampton and other cities, which developed specialisms in engineering and science. The development of a larger administrative arm of government, with civil service reforms and with recruitment by examination, led to the modernisation of curricula; the idea of a classical education, hitherto dominant in Oxford and Cambridge, was supplemented by the demand for 'modern' subjects such as economics, history, philosophy and political science. The statue of Jeremy Bentham sits prominently in University College London. The LSE was founded by four Fabian socialists, Sidney and Beatrice Webb, George Bernard Shaw, and Graham Wallas, with the aim of training a new administrative elite. Anthropological studies accompanied the rise of Empire. The recent row over the prominent statue of Cecil Rhodes on the façade of Oriel College on the High Street in Oxford reminds us of Britain's colonial history. F.R. Leavis conducted a fierce academic battle in Cambridge in the 1940s and 1950s to remodel the teaching of English Literature to fit a mission of school teachers to contribute to the 'civilising' of the country, even though until about 1960 only 5 per cent of people went to universities after leaving school. Of course parallel developments occurred in other countries: Germany's universities became major resources in the development of both its economy and government in the later nineteenth century, and the French Grand Écoles were designed to contribute to the formation of the French state and its enterprises.

A system driven by these variant ruling-class elites established the essential structures of European universities, prior to their development as 'mass institutions' from the 1960s onwards. Their large expansion then took place in the context of the

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post-war 'welfare' or 'class' settlements, in which an idea of enhanced opportunities and shared entitlements became part of the dominant ideology or common sense of the age. Thus in Britain, the Robbins Report of 1963 advocated the provision of university education for all young people who achieved the relevant level of academic qualification. In some continental countries, access to university education became virtually a right of citizenship.

Different nations adopted different ways of meeting this enhanced entitlement. Britain adopted what Ralph H. Turner called a model of 'sponsored mobility', according to which all young people who achieved the relevant level of qualification should have access to a university education which would support them in achieving a degree, usually within a period of three or four years.² The convention, widely extended from its Oxbridge origins, of the 'residential university', with students living away from their parental homes within a university community in term time, emphasised the function of Britain's universities in 'acculturation' - the acquisition of social and cultural capital. But this system as it expanded remained a highly stratified one. In the polytechnics, mostly formed in the 1960s, and the 'new universities' which they became in 1992 (comprising half of the higher educational system), a high proportion of students were recruited locally and lived at home, many took paid work while they studied, and there was a much lower density of extra-curricular activity. Employment and post-graduate opportunities were significantly proportional to a university's status. In particular, those for graduates from Oxbridge were spectacularly higher than for graduates of inner city new universities.

Contrasting with the UK model of 'sponsored mobility' was an American and Continental model of 'contest mobility'. In some European countries, access to university even became a free entitlement, but more responsibility was assigned to the individual student to gain benefit from it. Thus resources were far more sparse, teaching and learning less well organised, periods of study more extended, and drop-out rates much higher.³

In Britain, the principle that all university degrees should be of comparable academic standard, and that students should be financially supported to an equal degree, nevertheless remained dominant for many years. The effect of the large expansion of student numbers which took place from 1960 (from 5 per cent to nearly 50 per cent of the 18+ age-group in fifty years) was to partially 'democratise'

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the university system, allowing access to social fractions which had hitherto been excluded. Even though the relative *proportions* of young people from different social classes of origin attending university changed scarcely at all during this period, there were very substantial increases in the *numbers* coming from lower-status groups.

Changes in the content of university education, reflecting both the access of different social strata to the system, and new occupational opportunities for graduates, accompanied this expansion. The curriculum innovation which took place in the new universities (both the 1960s generation of 'plate glass universities' which included Lancaster, Sussex, Kent, Essex, and Warwick, and the post 1970s 'polytechnic' institutions) saw the expansion of sociology, cultural studies and other 'radical' disciplinary developments. This was part of a larger 'modernisation', as it became recognised that economic competitiveness depended on increases in knowledge in the workforce at large, and on the contributions of research. The foundation of the Open University, by Harold Wilson's Labour government in 1966, was a significant milestone in this process, making low-cost part-time university education available to adults without the need for any prior educational qualification at all, and using methods of distance learning.⁴

But just as the post-war welfare settlement entered its period of turmoil in the 1970s ('the fiscal crisis of the state' was one formulation of this), the expanded public university system was also entering a critical period. It was a different matter to fund a 'mass' higher education system than one which educated only a small minority of school leavers, especially when, even after expansion, it was still only half of each generation that received any direct benefit from it. The 'standard model' of the UK system, of well-resourced residential universities, was always going to be hard to fund on this larger scale, even though until the 1970s this was still upheld as the desirable goal. The 'practical' solution which was adopted was to try to achieve the accepted purposes, but at a lower cost: the cost per student was reduced by 36 per cent between 1989 and 1997 alone.⁵ Governments set up commissions of inquiry to find solutions to this structural issue. The Labour Government's Dearing Report of 1997 tinkered with the problem, seeking a 'fix' by introducing a low tuition fee of £1000 to be paid by students. The Browne Report of 2010 (chaired by a former CEO of the oil company BP who had no working experience of universities) adopted a more radical solution - to make the students meet nearly all of the cost of their education through borrowing against their future income.⁶ What

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no-one has yet dared to do is to fundamentally re-think the larger problem of how post-school education could be provided for *every* citizen, with an efficient use of resources, and at an acceptable cost.

The large number and more inclusive social origins of the students in the expanded system were a source of discomfort and anxiety to the political right. In so far as many of them were studying subjects such as sociology, cultural studies, and the social sciences and humanities, they and their teachers were seen as antipathetic to the 'enterprise culture', and sociology in particular was attacked as virtually subversive. The student protests of the late 1960s and 1970s remained a potent memory long after they had passed. Denigration of so-called 'mickey-mouse' subjects such as media studies, and condescension towards 'the polytechnics' in general, became common in the conservative media, even though the 'creative industries' and their workforce had become as important to the British economy as manufacturing.

There was also the real problem of how a mass higher education system would be funded, given the presumed public antipathy to taxation. It was the New Labour government that made the first move towards imposing the costs of university education on its students. Following the recommendations of the Dearing Report, it abolished maintenance grants, and a loan-based student fee of £3000 was imposed, although a significant measure of governmental funding continued. The populist argument for this was that a funding system which privileged university students was unfair to those who did not attend university, whose taxes were paying for those who did. The Coalition Government of 2010-2015, following the recommendations of the Browne Report (commissioned by New Labour), increased the maximum student fee to £9000 per year (which rapidly became the standard fee). It also withdrew funding support for humanities and social science teaching, in yet a further attempt to discourage study of subjects believed to be antipathetic to business values. The dishonesty of the pseudo-egalitarian claims which were made for these reforms was exposed when the Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA) for poorer students undertaking further education between the ages of 16 and 19 was also abolished in England in 2010.

A genuinely egalitarian response to the problem of how to equitably fund post-school education, by funding designated kinds of education for *all* school leavers, has never been considered. Nothing, it seems, can persuade the English to abandon

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their privileging of the academic over the non-academic. By contrast, in a nation where a 'social democratic settlement' has survived, namely Germany, and where high status and rewards are accorded to 'technical' occupations, university education is still largely free for students. Perhaps this is because it can be recognised as a benefit to all.

Neoliberal corporate capitalism

As we have seen, as the overall postwar settlement began to unravel, the 'democratic educator' conception of education began to be marginalised, as the neoliberal regime imposed radical changes.

Neoliberalism, although it appears to name an ideology, is a term also used to refer to the entire post-1980s capitalist system which it dominates. This ideology is one which advocates free, unrestrained markets, and an ethic of individualism and individual choice, operating on a global scale. Its reality is somewhat different. The modern capitalist era is dominated not by free markets, free individual choice, and individual entrepreneurs competing within them, but by global corporations, functioning as powerful oligopolies, and exercising a considerable degree of control over consumers, citizens and the political environment. These corporations include banks, multi-national manufacturing companies, and media and information-based organisations, such as News Corporation, Microsoft, Apple, Google, and Facebook. These are the entities whose profit-making operations dominate our world, and increasingly that of education

These bodies are surrounded by a satellite field of supporting institutions which are supposed to regulate the managed markets within which corporations operate, but which seem to do so largely in corporate interests, sometimes against those of wider publics. Examples are 'private' credit rating agencies like Moody, Standard and Poors, and Fitch, which are funded by private subscribers but whose assessments can bring governments to their knees; international accountancy firms such as the 'Big Four' which dominate this market, and which seem unwilling ever to detect or expose major malpractices; and consultancy firms such as McKinsey's, which devise and propagate the corporate strategies of neoliberalism. The power of this corporate system has invaded government itself, at both national and international levels.⁷ What do the IMF, the European Central Bank, and the OECD stand for if

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not the interests of corporate and financial capital, and a commitment to suppress alternative ideas of how economies could be managed?

We have seen in Britain over nearly forty years the pervasive influence which this system of corporate power (self-promoted as a free market) has gained over the state and civil society. Publicly owned service-providers, like the utilities and the railways, have been sold off to corporations, some of them, ironically, now owned by foreign states. Ostensibly public services, such as the provision of security and the punishment of offenders, have been outsourced to private corporations like Serco. Quasi-markets have been introduced in most public spheres, including education, even where it still impolitic to allow them to be operated for profit. The academy chains which now own and run many schools are surely the precursors of corporate providers. At the time of writing, it was announced that the Royal Parks, one of the treasures of London, are to be obliged to earn a higher financial return on their public spaces through hiring them out for events and entertainments. The enemies of public provision circle round the BBC and the National Health Service, looking for ways to break down these remaining major holdings of public goods.

Neoliberalism and the universities

It would be surprising if universities had not been substantially influenced over the last few decades by this emerging environment, and indeed in Britain they have been. They have been reconstituted as corporations (the post-1992 universities are formally designated as such), and are expected to compete for resources and status in a market regulated by the state. (Government determines how many undergraduate students universities may admit, allocates substantial resources for research, and maintains a system of quality assurance.) British universities have always been in competition with one another, to attract students, faculty, resources for research, and private endowments. But this competition has in recent years become much more pervasive and insistent. Regular inspection and audit by state-licensed agencies has required universities to submit to assessments of their supposed quality by a variety of measures, and these have become translated through press reports into published league tables of 'excellence', ratings which define universities' relative positions in their various 'markets'. (Hypocritically, the quality assurance agencies claim to have no responsibility for

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the league tables which are derived from their assessments, but which are their most influential outcome.) Regulated fee structures, by which non-European students are obliged to pay twice the fees of 'home' students, amplify the effects of these measures, since a high 'league table' position encourages overseas recruitment and the income flows which it brings.

Research is also subject to competition through the regulatory structure. To receive income to fund the research of their faculty members, universities are obliged to take part in a competition every few years (now called the Research Excellence Framework or REF), in which research 'outputs' are assessed for their comparative quality. The procedure is operated by specialist academics, in a form of peer assessment, one of whose effects is to give legitimacy to this process in the minds of those who are assessed. Thus not only does this exercise dominate the research agendas of universities for material reasons, but it also diverts the attention of researchers away from the intrinsic objects and purposes of their research, towards these impersonal, other-directed measures of value.

The introduction of high student fees (which are now required to cover the full costs of education, except for STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and mathematics), which still receive some state support), funded through a loan which is required to be repaid from future earnings, requires students to define their entry into university as a long-term financial investment in their own futures. When they take up a university place, students are in effect invited to make a purchase, like that of a property, funded through a kind of mortgage. Students have thus been redefined as consumers of the services which the university, as an educational corporation, provides. The university has to adopt the mind-set of a commercial provider or retailer, needing above all to attract and retain its 'customers' if it is to maintain its status and financial viability in its markets. The Quality Assurance Agency and Research Excellence Frameworks perform a role akin to that of the credit rating agencies in the financial sphere, in assessing how well universities are performing. One measure by which universities are assessed is the National Student Survey or NSS, which provides an aggregated form of consumer (or student) feedback on the quality of service which students believe they are receiving, in return for their now substantial commitment of time and money (students may well complete their studies with a debt of £50,000, because of the accumulation of interest on their loans).

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The neoliberal system aims to transform individual mentalities and cultures as well as economic institutions. Margaret Thatcher insisted that market reforms had a moral purpose.⁸ In the early days of Thatcherism there was a great deal of advocacy of the 'enterprise culture'. (A principal target of the neoliberal revolution was the 'culture of dependency' which allegedly pervaded the welfare state.) One of the aims - and consequences - of the reorganisation of universities as corporate entities operating in a variety of national and international markets has been to promote such changes in their dominant mentalities.⁹

The earlier system gave access to university education as a kind of intergenerational gift to the young. The scale of grant assistance to students was determined by the level of parental income, assigning this responsibility to families where they could afford it, while otherwise it was assumed by society (taxpayers) as a whole.¹⁰ Students' trust in their university and the education it provided was encouraged by its being given without obligation of financial repayment.¹¹ The only conditions it imposed were educational ones - requirements to attend, study, pass examinations. This system devolved authority to faculty members, who essentially determined the academic programmes which students chose.¹² Under the older dispensation, universities, although ultimately funded by the state (at one time through a quinquennial 'block grant'), had considerable autonomy. This relative independence from the state also allowed for considerable diversity within universities, for example in the cultures of different subject-fields, often linked to the vocations to which these fields pointed. The more corporate system of today has led to a homogenisation of practices within universities, although academic disciplines still retain their distinct cultures.

Significant changes in university governance have driven these developments. The Educational Reform Act of 1992 transferred the effective 'ownership' of the old polytechnics, now designated as 'new universities', from elected local councils to the government-approved membership of governing bodies. It was ruled that the majority of these governors should be 'independent' - which meant drawn largely from business.¹³ Such governors often had little knowledge of higher education, and tended to adopt a corporate model of what a university should be, for example in their approach to 'human resources', 'customer satisfaction', and financial priorities. These changes eroded the idea of the university as having a distinctive commitment to the values of learning and education.¹⁴

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In this new environment there was every incentive for university managements to adopt the methods and cultures of corporate institutions. Formerly collegial and relatively democratic forms of internal governance - election by faculty members to senior positions, decision-making by representative senates and academic boards - have been diminished in favour of hierarchical systems of management. Since universities are now in open commercial rivalry with one another, the functions essential to this competition - finance, marketing, fund-raising, estates, human resources - are strengthened, and the role of academics in decision-making processes weakened. Accompanying the ascendancy of neoliberalism in the public sector is the rise of occupations whose expertise lies in markets and regulation - accountants and auditors, corporate lawyers, public relations and human resource practitioners, contract managers, administrators - at the expense of the professions concerned with the 'primary tasks' of institutions, such as teachers, researchers and doctors. The professionals find themselves subordinated to these new managerial regimes.

For some universities, active programmes of merger and acquisition have been adopted, swallowing up weaker competitors with the aim of corporate expansion. The relationships between academic faculty and their university employers are significantly changed. Whereas formerly the status of academics had some of the attributes of an earned entitlement (represented by such conventions as 'tenure', the unassailability of 'academic freedom', and the collective self-determination by faculty of academic matters), such 'rights' are being whittled away. An earlier pattern of limited differentials related to academic seniority, with normal progression through length of service as well through responsibility and achievement, has been weakened. The rewards for senior managers are now set by reference to the corporate sector. At the top end of the seniority scale, a 'transfer market' has developed for the recruitment of senior staff, in the competition for research funding and reputation, and in the interests of recruitment.¹⁵ Salaries and perquisites (such as not having to teach undergraduates) become personalised for academic 'stars'. At the other end of the salary scale, there has been a large increase in the proportion of academic staff on part-time and fixed-term contracts, as institutions seek to minimise their costs, exercise tighter control over their workforce, and extract more 'value' from their labour. The regime of 'accountability' brought about by quality assurance systems, and by the empowerment, intended or otherwise, of students as 'consumers', has intensified pressure on staff. Reports of low morale in academic as well as other professions always need to be treated with caution, but they are

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now so widespread that their substance cannot be in doubt. The Universities and Colleges Union is campaigning against the increasing 'casualisation' of university employment, with temporary and 'zero-hours' contracts becoming commonplace.

It is to be expected that students will take a more instrumental relationship to their educational experience, and feel less trust in their institutions, when they are required to treat their education as a financial investment. Indeed this was its 'moral' purpose, neoliberalism's (anti-) social engineering. It is not only because of internet technology and the ease of copying texts that the risk of plagiarised assessment is now electronically investigated as normal practice. Students are less inclined to cheat if their work is assessed by teachers who know them, and for whom they feel respect and appreciation, than if they feel quite unrecognised as individuals. Similarly, litigious complaint by university students, against their grades or against alleged failings in their educational provision, have increased in recent years.¹⁶ This was an effect predicted in the Dearing Report in 1997 when it initiated this new regime.

Competition between universities has become a global one, and this has become another driver of developments within the United Kingdom. The goal for leading universities is now to become recognised as 'world class', and to be able to attract the high fee-paying students, the research grants and the philanthropic endowments which follow from that status.

It is now likely that the provision of e-learning courses will provide access to commercial higher educational providers, and enable them to gain a significant share of the educational market.¹⁷ A problem here is that learning at any depth usually depends on direct contact with teachers, and also on membership of learning communities such as universities have aspired to be. High 'production values' and 'star professors' cannot compensate for what is lost when these relationships are absent.

The logic of the neoliberal design for higher education is that competition will increase outputs and improve standards. Market forces are supposed to ensure that the supply of 'goods' will be brought into line with the demand for them. Thus students are expected to study subjects where this will lead them to satisfying and rewarding employment. A 'free market' in academic employment will likewise ensure the best allocation of teaching and research skills. A system which rewards 'successful' universities, and drives out of business the unsuccessful ones will on this model ensure the greater good. Just as with the now-fragmented school system, the aim is for successful institutions to expand to take up the market share of the

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defeated ones.¹⁸

There have been eloquent and effective critics of the emerging neo-liberal system. Stefan Collini, in *What are Universities For*, has attacked the neoliberal idea of the university as principally a contributor to the national economy.¹⁹ He asserts learning and scholarship as intrinsic values in themselves, and holds that these are central to what universities should be. Collini believes that the decision by government to no longer fund university teaching in other than the STEM subjects and medicine is something like a moral outrage. Keith Thomas has similarly criticised the brutal utilitarianism of governmental approaches to universities, and the destructive reforms they have imposed, in terms which overlap considerably with the argument of this article.²⁰ ‘For centuries’, his article concludes, ‘universities have existed to transmit and reinterpret the cultural and intellectual inheritance, and to provide a space where speculative thought can be freely pursued without regard to its financial value. In a free and democratic society it is essential that that space is preserved.’

Universities do of course have this role, but in the age of ‘mass’ university education this is by no means all that they must do. It is hard to see Thomas’s concluding phrase as adequately describing the primary mission of those universities and colleges which populate the less prestigious half (or even three quarters) of the British university system, although it is an important part of it.²¹ We need an analysis and a programme of reform which is broader than this.²² The second part of this article will attempt to outline such a programme.

Part 2 Alternatives to the neoliberal university

The neoliberal idea of the university is that it should provide education and research on the model of corporations delivering ‘goods’ in a market. In fact, as so often, this ‘market’ has to be subsidised and regulated. Without state guarantees student ‘consumers’ cannot afford the ‘product’ (hence the need for a heavily subsidised system of student loans, and even a residuum of grants for ‘vital’ STEM subjects); while on the research side, government funding is also deemed necessary, since investors will not pay in sufficient quantity for new knowledge whose returns they cannot fully capture, and when it is difficult to predict the value of new ideas or techniques before they have been discovered. Nevertheless, with these qualifications, this is the pattern of development to which the university sector is now being made to conform.

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We can see that the development of the neoliberal university over the past twenty-five years has led to the ascendancy of the 'industrial' over the 'democratic' and 'old humanist' conceptions of what education should be. It must be acknowledged that, to date, contemporary equivalents of the 'old humanists' such as Stefan Collini and Keith Thomas have gained a wider hearing as critics of the neoliberal system than modern advocates of the cause of 'democratic education', whose lack of influence reflects a larger decline of the left.²³ Collini and Thomas have been making clear how the values of education, learning and scholarship are being corrupted by the instrumentalism and corporatism of the new system, with its endless gradings, measures, and quasi-commercial kinds of competition.

But it is less clear what the 'democratic educator tradition' has to say about what should happen to post-school education, and this is the deficit which we aim to repair. It needs to be recognised that in a complex modern society, each of Williams's three traditions or systems of value has a significant role in the conception of the university. We cannot be indifferent to the well-being of the economy, or to the traditions of high culture. We in *Soundings* are not, after all, educational Maoists. But how the balance of influence between these three traditions is to be struck is fundamental. There is now a gross imbalance, in favour of the 'industrial trainers' and the ideology of the market, which needs to be changed.

Here are some principles on which reform should be based:

1. Post-school education is a public as well as a private good, and should be the entitlement of all citizens, supported and funded by the democratic state. It follows that a significant element of public support should be provided for post-school education of accredited kinds for all those who want it, and have the motivations and aptitudes necessary to benefit from it.

The aim should be that all citizens can benefit from this availability. This requires that there be support for post-school education not only at the level of the academic degree, but for learning other kinds of knowledge and capability as well. Just as primary and secondary schooling are available to all, so tertiary education should be as well. Why should a society as rich as ours find it feasible to provide universal high-quality education at primary and secondary levels, but continue to regard tertiary education as an optional and unequal add-on?

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The provision of adult and continuing education, through 'second chance' or lifelong learning institutions, is particularly important to this purpose. But this sphere is seeing the widespread capture of traditions of democratic education by the norms of 'industrial training', in various new senses of that term. The 'continuing professional development' (CPD) now required in many occupations is often narrowly defined, as instrumental modules, to be ticked off, requirement by requirement, with their intended learners seen as functionaries in a workforce rather than as reflective professionals. It entirely reflects the anti-democratic educational ethos of neoliberal governments that institutions committed to democratic access, like the Open University, and adult education generally, are being drastically diminished and de-funded.

For technological and material reasons, the availability of paid, routine work is likely to diminish in modern western societies. This means that learning and education should be assigned greater value and priority than ever before. Resources liberated by technological advance should be made available for enhanced input into human relationships, in many contexts of learning and care.

2. The education of children and young people should be understood as an inter-generational gift, as a resource provided by an older generation for the development of their 'collective children' in the next. Since the idea for the universalisation of a tertiary educational entitlement will undoubtedly involve an additional commitment of resources, and since the present economic arrangements substantially favour the old over the young, and are generating increasing inequality, it could well be appropriate to find the necessary resources through a tax on wealth - perhaps one 'hypothecated' to education.

In response to the argument that graduates should make an individual contribution to the cost of their university education, the present system of repayable loans should be replaced by a form of 'graduate tax', paid as a small percentage (e.g. 1 per cent) of graduates' taxable income for a fixed period of years. The idea of this would not be to repay the notional full cost of a student's education, but rather to make some contribution to society's resources in recognition of the personal benefits which a university education brings.

Such a tax, unlike a loan repayment, would be progressive (proportional to income). It might be that it should not begin to be payable until a few years after graduation, to lessen anxieties for students while they are studying. One hopes that

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such additional increment to income tax would be experienced as an acceptable return for a benefit received, and would feel less burdensome to graduates than the obligation to repay a large specific monetary debt with interest.

3. *An alternative model of governance should be adopted*, whose aim should be to give all relevant stakeholders parity in the governance of higher education institutions. Such stakeholders would be drawn from elected local authorities, institutions of significance in the local and national (even international) 'ecology' of an institution, teaching and research faculty, and students and alumni.

Such a 'stakeholder model' would reverse the trend by neoliberal governments of successive party complexions of transferring governance of the university system to interests which are mainly representative of business. This change has been particularly marked in the transfer of authority over the 'new (post-1992) universities' to bodies on which 'independent governors' have constitutional majorities, and in handing the initiative for university reform to corporate leaders such as Lord Browne.

4. *The resources and skills of tertiary educational institutions should be regarded as being held as a public trust*, which would carry the obligation to make these resources available to publics by whatever means possible. Universities command large resources of space and facilities, which are often essentially closed to local and other communities unless they are able to pay high prices to access them, either by renting space, or through entitlements of membership obtained through entry - often competitive - as enrolled students. Universities should have an obligation to make many of their resources available for public use, especially as they often lie under-used for large parts of the year. The Research Assessment Framework has in recent years included as a dimension of 'value' the 'impact' of research. This concept of 'impact' should be widened to cover the full range of activities of universities, whose quality assurance should include an assessment of how widely and effectively a university brings cultural benefit to its surrounding community.

5. *A significant change in the model of quality assurance and inspection is required*, to bring about a greater respect for differences of culture and purposes between institutions, and for their development as distinctive entities.

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Universities are now stratified in a hierarchy of alleged merit. The national objective is to maintain universities of 'world class' (whatever that may mean). Leading universities have created an elite representative body (the Russell Group) to defend their interests; teaching resources are now preferentially awarded to universities able to recruit the best-qualified students; and the research funding system gives by far the largest share of research resources to the most privileged universities. This development has been undermining the democratic principle that had its greatest influence in the development of universities in the 1960s and 1970s, and which held that universities should offer an education of a comparable standard to *all* students, wherever they studied, difficult as this ideal was to sustain. Instead what has happened is that a system of funding and quality assurance which was meant to ensure parity of standards has become an instrument of inequality and stratification. The effect of a common metric of quality applied to all has been to ensure that all institutions are required to conform to one model, employ common systems of compliance, and suppress whatever particular capabilities and uniqueness they might aspire to.

Quality assurance and inspection should be undertaken not primarily as an exercise in competitive grading, but as an opportunity for learning and development. The outcomes of Quality Assurance exercises should surely be in the first instance to establish that standard measures of achievement and quality have been met. But subsequently, for the great majority of institutions which meet acceptable standards, the purpose of evaluation should be to recognise what is distinctive about an institution, and to assist it in developing its capabilities. It follows that different stakeholders should be involved in democratic forms of quality assurance and inspection.²⁴ Inspection and audit should be occasions to learn about good practices, and institutions should be 'peer reviewers' of each other's activities.²⁵

6. It should be a fundamental principle of a democratic society that learning and knowledge should be as widely shared and available as possible, and not unnecessarily confined to privileged elites and minorities. Yet the seclusion and 'privatisation' of knowledge is just what is facilitated by current systems of access to information. Consider, for example, the catastrophic assault on the public library service now being carried out by the government. While its ostensible rationale is to reduce public spending, it surely also embodies a hatred of learning as a democratic public good. Consider

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also the 'market' in published learning, research and scholarship. For those who are members of universities and research institutions, access to published research is available, 'paid for' through the membership fees or entitlements of these institutions. But for the general public (even the huge public of graduates of these institutions) there is little access to publications, except at the prohibitive cost imposed by the commercial journal publishers. (One can sometimes buy two books for the cost of downloading a single article in an academic journal.)

A desirable reform, from the perspective of a democratic culture, would be to invest in public libraries the entitlement to access the same resources of learning as are now available to university libraries, through the electronic means which now make this feasible. Costs per unit of access would no doubt need to be paid by libraries, which should be funded to meet these costs. It might even be that a small subscription charge could be made to those library users who wish to use facilities for scholarly access, since they would be making additional use of a public resource. But the principle, that as far as possible knowledge should be made freely available to all, is fundamental. Wikipedia is an exemplary model in this respect. In the present era, information technology makes it feasible for public libraries, far from being 'obsolete', to be the means for open public access to knowledge and research.

7. A different balance between the priorities and values which shape the higher university system is needed. We have shown in the first part of this article the conflicted and confused pattern which has characterised the development of university education in Britain. A 'traditional' elite model of universities was extended and generalised, with insufficient attention to its feasibility. As the economic costs of its expansion, and its potentially radical implications for culture and society, became recognised, there was a reactionary backlash, enacted in reduced funding, enforced marketisation, intensified state control, and the re-imposition of educational hierarchy. There has been no corresponding depth or rigour of reflection from the 'democratic' side on how a universally accessible post-school educational system could be developed.

This situation contrasts with the earlier development of democratic education at primary and secondary levels, in which, it must be noted, social scientists and progressive educators had a large role. It was in considerable part through research in the sociology of education that the persistent inequalities of opportunity and

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outcome in British society were identified, through the work of scholars and practitioners such as A.H. Halsey, Brian Jackson and Dennis Marsden, David Hargreaves, Basil Bernstein, in France Pierre Bourdieu, and not least Raymond Williams. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, Conservative governments have decided that 'educational research', especially if it is conducted by sociologists, is, from its ideological point of view, a problem. Since the rise of the neoliberal hegemony, sociologists of education have been given little significant role in educational policy-making. The most recent commissions of inquiry entrusted to make recommendations for the future of higher education have, either, as in the case of the Dearing Committee of 1997, been asked merely to mend and patch the existing system, or, as with the Browne Report of 2012, to set it on to a path of full marketisation.

Furthermore while a truly gigantic apparatus (Ofsted, the QAA, etc) of quality assurance has been built to monitor and measure all elements of the educational system, this apparatus has shown little capability for the generation of new knowledge of educational systems. Its purposes are determined by norms ultimately derived from the field of accountancy - that is to say, these systems measure compliance to pre-determined norms, and are without curiosity or interest in the new or unexpected. These audit systems are themselves a demonstration of the hostility to learning and understanding of the culture of neoliberalism.

8. *There is need to renew a debate about the role which universities should have in the making of a good society.* Merely haphazard adjustments of the post-school educational system to economic exigencies, or ideological fashions or obsessions, cannot bring about the depth of understanding of the functions of these institutions that is needed. As a first step in reform, we simply need to know more, both descriptively, and theoretically, about these issues.

A first necessary step therefore is for the undertaking of a substantial body of genuine research, into the current experiences, outcomes and benefits of university and other kinds of tertiary education. How do institutions differ? How comparable or non-comparable are the experiences which they provide for students? What returns follow from the investments made in them, by individuals, families and governments? What relationship does university education have to the provision of opportunities, and to the perpetration or redress of inequalities of class and status?

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And in the sphere of research, what are the consequences of the Research Excellence Framework and of the other instruments of research funding? How can one assess the actual outcomes of research activity, for the economy and for the public good generally?

What is needed is the restoration of the priority earlier accorded to social scientific research into education, through targeted research programmes (to which 'bids' can be made), funded through the Research Councils and directly by government. Such programmes of research are now needed to provide the knowledge-base through which a new consideration can be given to the provision of tertiary education in a democratic, post-neoliberal society.

The second step would be the appointment of a new Committee of Inquiry, whose members would represent each of the three major educational traditions identified by Williams - the public educators, the 'industrial trainers' or marketeers, and the 'traditional humanists'. This Committee should have as its remit to review the institutional forms into which the tertiary education system has evolved. It should make recommendations for the design of a democratic model of a tertiary, indeed lifelong, education for all. The reason this is needed is that the current system now fails by reference to each one of the three traditions described by Raymond Williams. We have discussed at length the deficiencies of the system from the perspective of universal democratic access. So far as the 'humanist' ideal of the university is concerned, the problem is that so much dilution and instrumentalisation of education has taken place, with such a loss of human resources, that high-quality experiences of education have become much rarer than they should be. Obtaining 'grades' and achieving understanding of a field in any depth are not the same thing. And the problem with the project of 'industrial training' in England is that there is no 'industry' (in the broadest sense) to which tertiary educational programmes are connected. Moreover, many ostensibly full-time students in reality study for only two or three days a week, while, in order to maintain themselves, they engage in largely mindless paid work which has no relation to their education at all. It might be that, in some fields at least, a different model of learning, which aimed to link students' present and future work to more intensive part-time forms of education, would have a deeper meaning for them. There is a need to return to fundamentals in reviewing this system, in order to decide how it can best fulfil its different purposes.

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9. *Universities should be major centres of reflection and initiative regarding alternative futures and programmes for society.* We have set out here an alternative programme for higher education, in a way which might eventually contribute to governmental policy-making. But it is essential that those who study and work in universities should take an active part in such discussions, and share responsibility for achieving changes, in dialogue with the larger society. The fact that in recent years universities have been largely distracted from social responsibilities by the imposition of neoliberal reforms upon them is a significant part of our current political deadlock and malaise.

It is obvious that changes in the system of tertiary education are unlikely to be achieved without much wider changes in the interconnected system of neoliberalism. But alternatives to the present order need to be thought about and developed in every institutional sphere, and that of the university is an essential place to begin this work: the hope would be that conceptions that may evolve in this context would have relevance and application elsewhere.

Notes

1. R. Williams, 'Education and British Society', in *The Long Revolution*, Chatto and Windus 1961, pp125-55.
2. R.H. Turner, 'Modes of Social Ascent through Education', *American Sociological Review*, 25 (5), 1970.
3. ERASMUS students visiting from Italy would note with amazement their much easier access to lecturers at the University of East London.
4. These included print and radio and tv broadcasts on channels unused during the night, local small-group study support, and short summer schools. The current neoliberal structure of full-cost fees and loans is causing severe damage to the Open University, and to other part-time open-access providers, which generally lie at the radical end of the spectrum of educational approaches.
5. Browne Report, p18.
6. In fact this is no solution at all. It is estimated that the upfront costs to government exceed that of the previous grant system, while as many as 50

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per cent of graduates may prove unable to earn sufficient money to eventually repay their loan, according to the existing rules.

7. Colin Crouch has written about the hollowing out of democracy through its invasion by corporate power. See *Post-democracy*, Polity Press 2005; and *The Strange Non-death of Neo-liberalism*, Wiley 2011.

8. For example: 'The economic success of the Western world is a product of its moral philosophy and practice. *The economic results are better because the moral philosophy is superior*: Choice is the essence of ethics: if there were no choice, there would be no ethics, no good, no evil; good and evil have meaning only insofar as man is free to choose' (1977 speech to Zurich Economic Society).

9. Foucault's ideas have been important to understanding the role of governments in shaping mentalities.

10. It is interesting to note that an assumption of intra-familial dependence is also eroded by the new individualised arrangements, in which 18-year olds rather than parents are expected to take financial responsibility for their education. Neoliberalism thus attacks all social bonds.

11. Students have told me how the high fees they are required to pay make them easily critical, and resentful of what is provided for them, if anything, as they put it, 'goes wrong'. A lecturer recalled a student who had said to her in a class, 'I am paying £100 an hour to sit in the classroom to listen to you - how are you going to make it worth my while?' From a neoliberal perspective, such 'customerised' attitudes are a means to raise standards. But such institutionalised distrust does not create a good climate for learning.

12. The movement to 'modularise' the curriculum, undertaken in the name of 'student choice', undermined the coherence of academic programmes, and represented an individualisation of the university experience, both for students and staff. The 'old' universities were better able to resist these pressures than the new. See M.J. Rustin, 'Flexibility in Higher Education', in R. Burrows and B. Loader, *Towards a Post-Fordist Welfare State*, Routledge 1994.

13. The rules stated that 'Independent members shall be persons appearing to the appointing authority to have experience of, and to have shown capacity in, industrial, commercial or employment matters, or the practice of any profession.'

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14. It should be noted that while many of these ‘marketising’ reforms were set in motion by the Conservative government of 1989-1997, little or nothing was done to reverse them when New Labour came into power in 1997. Indeed it was Labour that was first responsible in 1998 for introducing undergraduate tuition fees as a solution to what was seen as a mounting financial crisis for the sector.

15. There are also incentives to recruit high-performing home and overseas students, since there are no limits on the intake of the best-qualified students, and since qualification at entry correlates with later ‘outcome measures’ of quality, such as ‘completion rates’ and later employment.

16. www.telegraph.co.uk/education/universityeducation/10871390/Student-complaints-to-universities-rise-to-20000.html. Minister for higher education David Willetts welcomed this situation: ‘If there are more complaints because students are more aware of what they should expect of funding and are more demanding, then I think that’s a good thing. When there’s a fee of £9,000, the university is obliged to show what they’re doing and provide a decent service.’

17. In *Global Education Inc.* (Routledge 2012), Stephen Ball describes the academic and commercial networks now working actively to expand the private provision of schooling, on ‘the market is best’ principle, especially in the global south. The British government has recently announced plans to make it easier for private universities to enter the higher educational market in England and Wales.

18. Government has incentivised this competition, through allowing universities to take unlimited numbers of students with the highest grades. However, many leading universities are reluctant to expand their numbers to any great extent, for fear that size may compromise their standards, and their value as a ‘positional good’.

19. S. Collini, *What are Universities For?* Penguin 2012.

20. K. Thomas, ‘Universities under Attack’, *London Review of Books*, 15.12.11.

21. In the framework in which this argument is set, both Collini and Thomas’s critiques represent a ‘traditionalist’ perspective on the proper role of the university, though they are not the less compelling for this. However the ‘life world’ of post-1992 universities does not have a prominent place in their descriptions.

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22. There is, however, a substantial critical literature on what is happening in higher education, including, in *Soundings*, Lynda Dyson's, 'The knowledge market' (*Soundings* 60, 2015). See R. Brown, *Everything for Sale: the Marketisation of Higher Education*, Society for Research into Higher Education 2013; J. Holmwood, *A Manifesto for the Public University*, Bloomsbury 2011; M. Molesworth, R. Scullion and E. Nixon (eds), *The Marketisation of Higher Education and the Student as Consumer*, Routledge 2011; and A. McGettigan, *The Great University Gamble: Money, Markets and the Future of Higher Education*, Pluto 2013. And for ideas for a cooperative university see Mike Neary at the University of Lincoln: <http://socialsciencecentre.org.uk/>.

23. A further important issue is how to challenge the hierarchy of prestige and resources of all kinds which characterises British universities, so that differences between institutions become more important, and inequalities between them less. This has as much to do with inequalities in the larger society, and the generational transmission of wealth and privilege, as with the universities themselves. It surely cannot be defensible that half the entrants to some leading universities have had a privately funded education.

24. I have developed this argument in broader terms in an earlier article: 'Rethinking audit and inspection', *Soundings* 26, 2004.

25. On collaborative models for school improvement see S. Rustin, 'What could Ofsted learn from "Instead" inspections run by headteachers?', *Guardian* 30 June 2015: www.theguardian.com/education/2015/jun/30/ofsted-learn-instead-alternative-inspections-headteachers-schools-naht; see also the detailed proposals by David Hargreaves, former Chief Inspector of the Inner London Education Authority, which propose a model for improvement for schools no longer regulated by local authorities. These include: 'Creating a self-improving school system' (2011), 'Leading a self-improving school system (2012); 'A self-improving school system in international context' (2012); and 'A self-improving school system: towards maturity' all published by the National College for School Leadership in Nottingham.

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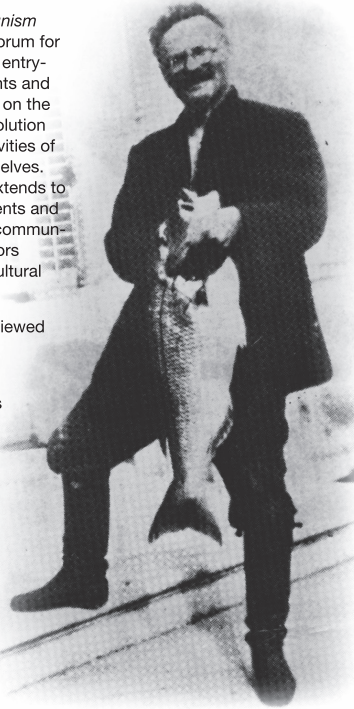
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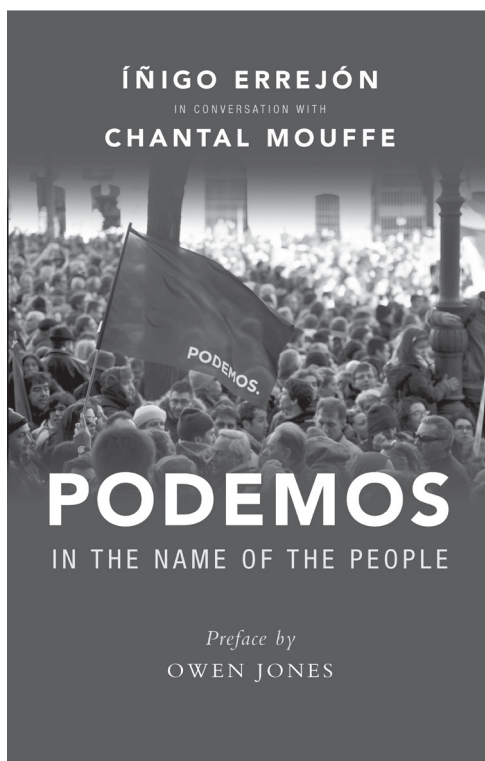


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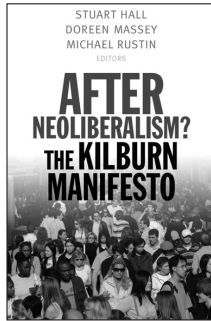
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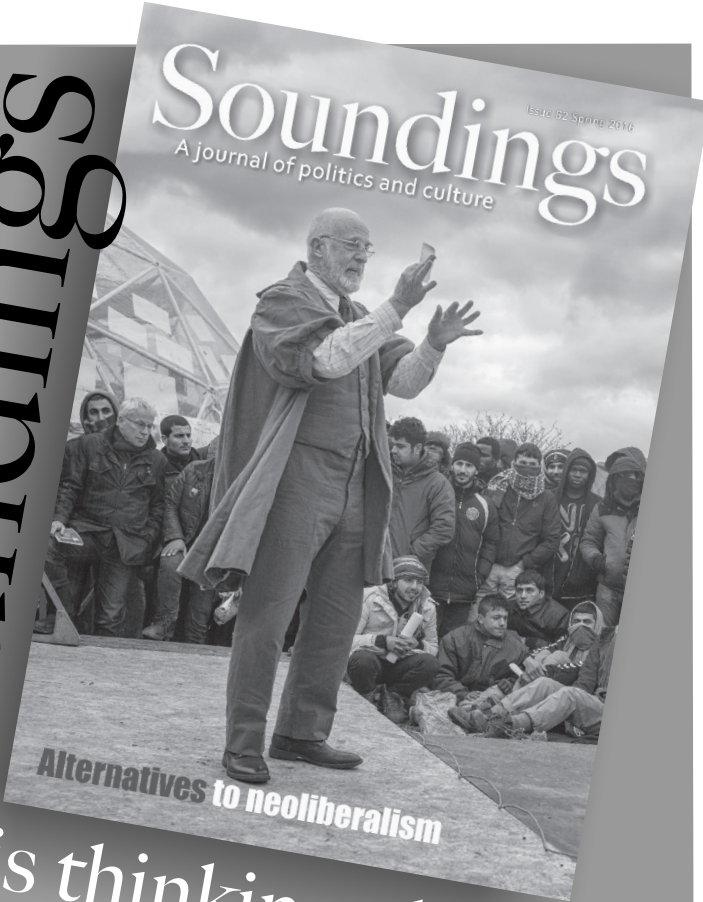
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